

CHAPTER IV

MACAULAY'S USE OF AUTHORITIES

ONE characteristic of Macaulay's History is the air of certainty which pervades it. The facts it contains and the deductions from the facts are all set forth as positive and indisputable truths about which no doubt can exist. This was in keeping with Macaulay's character. He was not given to doubts about anything past or present. Lord Melbourne is reputed to have said that he wished he could be 'as cocksure about anything as Macaulay is about everything'. This is a dangerous temper for a historian, since it is difficult to be sure that a writer has before him the whole of the material for determining what took place two hundred and fifty years ago, and it is not always easy to ascertain the precise degree of credit to be attached to the evidence of any particular witness. Many of the greater facts are certain enough : many of the minor facts are much more uncertain : most of the details must always remain obscure. Sometimes the historian must be content with a relative not an absolute certainty. He is bound to indicate to his readers, if he is frank, that some of his statements are only probable, and some of his conclusions only provisional.

Macaulay neither recognises this truth himself, nor allows his readers to perceive it. A very acute critic, Walter Bagehot, points out this defect in the

History, though
he exaggerates the difficulty of ascertaining
the facts.

You rarely come across anything which is
not decided ;
and when you do come across it, you seem to
wonder that